

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN – SHADOWS
John 9:1-25
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In poetry, art, literature, philosophy, the images of light and darkness have always been helpful ways of thinking about truth and falsehood, good, and evil. Religious language is full of it: some of the most direct happens in phrases which call God "The Father of Lights," and the personification of evil, "The Prince of Darkness." Despair and hopelessness are "the people who live in a land of deep darkness;" joy and goodness and vitality are expressed as "the light shining in the darkness." Darkness stands for ambiguity, at best; suffering, tragedy and death, at worst. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

In one of Ernest Hemingway's short stories, *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*, two waiters are closing the cafe for the night. The last customer, an old man, won't leave. The younger waiter becomes impatient. He wants to go home to his wife. The other waiter says: "I am of those who like to stay late at the cafe. With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night."

"I want to go home and into bed," the younger man persists. The older waiter continues: "We are of two different kinds. It is not only a question of youth and confidence although these things are very beautiful. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the cafe."

Finally the customer leaves, the younger waiter, goes home to his wife, and as he reluctantly closes the cafe and has a nightcap himself, the older waiter muses - and Hemingway shows his hand:

"What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name: thy kingdom nada, thy will be nada, in nada as it is in nada ... Hail nothing, full of nothing, nothing is with thee." (*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 382/3)

Darkness and shadows, in literature, often represent everything that threatens life: particularly that ultimate threat of emptiness, meaninglessness, nothingness.

The author of the Fourth Gospel has written a powerful short story about darkness and shadows and light and truth and revelation. It is our text this morning. As was the case with the story of the woman at the well, this story is so long and convoluted that it is rarely read - or preached - in its entirety in a morning worship service.

Recall again that the author of the Gospel of John presents the Good News, not by way of a sequential account of Jesus' ministry, but through a series of stories based on isolated incidents. Early in the work, a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night to talk and Jesus tells him that he must be born again. Nicodemus finds that to be a curious suggestion and much of what

follows is the writer's explanation of what the new birth, the new life in Jesus Christ, means. It means a man, waiting 38 years for healing, getting up and walking away. It means a guilt-ridden woman of questionable character, given such a new image of herself that it was like living water. It means a man born blind, suddenly seeing.

The tale begins with his disciples calling his attention to a beggar, blind from birth, and asking if the man was blind because of something he had done, or if his parents were responsible. It was not a good question even though frequently asked. The whole point of the Book of Job is that human suffering is not necessarily a result of moral delinquency on the part of the sufferer or the sufferer's family. Instead of answering, however, Jesus made a paste out of his saliva and clay, placed it on the man's eyes, told him to wash in a pool. The man returned, with his sight - not restored because he never had it - but seeing for the first time in his life. That's Act 1, Scene 1.

Scene 2: His neighbors who have been watching him stumble out every morning to his spot beside the street to beg and who were accustomed to seeing him at the spot every day since the man was a child, were so surprised to see him with sight, many had trouble believing it was the same man. He assures them. "I am the man." "What happened?" they ask, "Who opened your eyes?" He answers, "The man called Jesus,"

Act 2, Scene 1: The neighbors bring the Pharisees and we learn for the first time that it's the Sabbath, and among the many things you are not allowed to do on the Sabbath is mix up a batch of paste and smear it on someone's eyes. The Pharisees ask the man what happened and he tells them. Some of them immediately jump on the fact that Sabbath rules have been broken. Others, however, are more impressed that a blind man is walking around seeing. "What's your opinion?" they ask. The man says "He is a prophet."

Act 2, Scene 2: It occurs to someone that the whole thing may be a hoax, so they go to the man's parents. "Yes, he is their son and, yes, he has been blind since birth." The Pharisees ask them how they think it happened. The parents tell them they don't have any idea but their son, though blind, isn't stupid, so why not ask him.

Act 3, Scene 1: Back to the newly sighted man, still walking around enjoying seeing for the first time. Now the Pharisees go on the offensive. "The man who healed you had to be a sinner because it's the Sabbath," they declare. "What did he do to you?" The next section is cleverly and well-written. "I have told you already; and you do not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?"

Now the dialogue assumes new intensity. The Pharisees let the man know, in no uncertain terms, that they are disciples of Moses, the true man of God, beside whom this disreputable law breaker is a nobody.

The man is undaunted. He warms to the subject and joins the issue. "Why this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." Their answer completes the progression: "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out of the synagogue.

Finale: Jesus catches up with the man. The man, who has come all the way from blindness to sight, from darkness through shadows to full light, now says, "Lord, I believe." And as the curtain begins to fall, several lingering Pharisees, watching almost wistfully, say, "Do you suppose we are the blind ones?" Those who are so sure that they have light, have the light because of who they are, possess the light as their personal property, are beginning to sense the edges of the shadows - and we think of the waiter lingering in the light of the cafe because the reality of the darkness means that all may be nothing.

The striking thing about this masterpiece of a story is the intriguing dynamic between the man who begins in darkness and gradually comes into the light, and the Pharisees who begin somewhere near the light and end up in the dark. There are some disturbing meanings here: among them the fact that healing is not always welcome; there was a certain comfortability in the status quo. The man was taken care of, after all, begging by the roadside. Healing disrupts things, apparently. In addition, the religious types, the true believers, are so threatened by Jesus that they hold on even more tightly to their certainties, almost consciously shutting their eyes so no more light can get in.

The great theologian Paul Tillich said one time: "The church very early forgot the word of the Gospel that he is the truth; and claimed that her doctrines about him were the truth." (*The New Being*, p. 70). The trouble with those Pharisees is the same trouble that afflicts a lot of religious types and that is that they had forgotten the fundamental difference between God and the ideas they believed about God. Their way of understanding became a system, a denomination, and accrued to itself the ultimacy which belongs solely to the God it is trying to describe and worship. It is the oldest dynamic in our story, it seems. "Our way is the only way," seems to be the inevitable theological conclusion. Christians are certain that Muslims are in the dark. Muslims are certain Christians are in the dark. Christians worry about the salvation of the Jews. Catholics excommunicate Protestants, Protestants imagine a hell full of Catholics. Baptists are sure Presbyterian are at least in the shadows if not in the dark. Pentecostals feel the same about Congregationalists and if you're the wrong brand of Lutheran you aren't welcome at a Missouri Synod Communion.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." We are called, you and I, not to possess that light, try to own it, nor frame it, and restrain it with our customs and traditions.

Our calling, as followers of Jesus Christ, is to allow the light to shine: simply to allow it to be - to call attention to itself and to illumine the world for us. We are called to live in the light which Jesus is.

What we need, as much as we need food and drink and love, is truth we can trust. What we need to live is something true enough to bet our lives on. That, I would submit, is what revelation is about. What we think we need are answers to a list of questions: devilishly persistent questions: "Is there a God?" "What's going to happen to me when I get old?" "Why is there suffering?" "Where am I going?" "What's the purpose of my life?" "What happens when I die?"

The revelation we want would be a list of simple answers to the questions that haunt us. We'd give anything for revelation with some objective certainty to it.

What the man in the story got, in the final analysis, was Jesus. What begins as restoration of sight ends with a truth so true he is on his knees affirming, "My Lord, I believe."

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *The Meaning of Revelation*, a very academic inquiry, ends with a simple confession that I have always found helpful.

"Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end; in which we are apprehended by the known; it means the self-disclosing of that eternal knower. Revelation means the moment in which we are surprised by the knowledge of someone there in the darkness and the void of human life; it means the self-disclosure of light in our darkness."

What we want from religion are answers: beliefs we can believe. What we get is not more beliefs, but a presence: the simple, but staggering truth that there is light in the darkness.

We live mostly in shadows, I think. We live with the awareness of a valley of the shadows, through which we must walk. In the meantime we live in the shadows of doubt and ambiguity, in a world that resists simplicity. We, most of us rather, are not given to live with the bright light of religious certainty shining on us constantly. Rather, it is shadowy business.

Remember Hemingway's waiter: "Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada." That is the final issue. Is all finally darkness, nothingness? "Hail nothing, full of nothing, nothing is with thee." Or is there light shining in the darkness? One of the oldest prayers in the English language invokes: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord: and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of the night; for the love of thy only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the radical proposal - the radical invitation to bet your life on the proposal - that he, Jesus the Christ, is the Light of the World. Thanks be to God. Amen.